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## THE HAPPY HUNTING-GROUND OF THE TEN'A

BY JOHN W. CHAPMAN

IN the year 1887 the writer was left at a little Indian village on the lower Yukon River. The natives of this region are variously designated as Ingiliiks, Tinneh, or Ten'a. They are of Athapascan stock, and are related to the Apache and other tribes in the United States. Twenty years ago they were living in a nearly primitive condition. Stone implements had been discarded but a short time; and their legends, customs, and traditions were nearly all of a primitive character. On a hill overlooking the village was one of the ancient burial-sites; and the graves were, and still are, objects of interest to visitors. Beside each grave, attached in some manner to a stake or to a tree, was an implement that had been used by the dead, or some utensil intended for his use. These were invariably broken or in some way rendered unserviceable. New tin pails would be thrust through by a stake, and nearly every grave had one of these to mark it. Guns, snowshoes, and other implements of the chase, were to be seen here and there. During the warmer months, and especially in the spring, the doleful crooning for the dead could be heard almost any morning from the hill-top; and if one cared to go up, he might find a man sitting in an attitude of dejection by the grave of his wife, or a widow, with her hair cut short at the neck, mourning by the grave of her husband.

Such marks as these, indicating a tender regard for the memory of the dead, and probably a belief in their continued existence, could not fail to excite the curiosity of a resident among a people so lightly touched by civilization, and to lead him off into the pursuit of that phantom which has tantalized so many students of primitive races, the real status of their belief in a future existence. In the present instance, the extreme reticence of the people with regard to this subject, and the vagueness of their expressions concerning it, had produced the impression upon me that they had no settled belief. Yet there was a legend, and, after nearly a quarter of a century of daily intercourse with its guardians, it was run to earth in a dug-out on the bank of a tributary of the Yukon. There were some things that kept curiosity alive; notably, the "parka" feasts given every year in the fall, in memory of deceased relatives. At these festivals the resources of the host are taxed to the utmost, and often the accumulations of years are given away. We learned, in a general way, that it was done for the benefit of the dead; and that the food which was offered the

guests, and the parkas or fur garments which were presented to them, in some manner fed and clothed the spirits of those who were gone. We also heard of a belief that the soul goes downward into the earth at death, and that it finds a trail leading up the Yukon to some city of the dead near its sources; and we found that the expression, "He has gone up the river," would nearly always provoke a smile, and sometimes some laughing comment. Little by little it came out that there was a tradition of a woman who in some way had been taken to the city of the dead, and had returned to her own people; and at length the whole story was told. I give it below, without embellishment.

"There was once a family living upon the Yukon, which consisted of a man and his wife, several sons, and a daughter. Since the girl was their only sister, her brothers were very fond of her, and did everything that they could think of to make her happy. Among other things, they made her a little sled for her own use.

"It came the time of the spring hunt, and the whole family prepared to go out into the mountains. When all was ready, they started out, each one pushing his sled; the girl coming last, and so getting the benefit of the trail made by the rest.

"As they went along, she lagged behind, and the rest of the family passed out of sight. She hurried to overtake them, putting her head down and pushing with all her might, looking up occasionally to see whether she could catch sight of them. At length she saw some one; but when she came near, it proved to be, not her own friends, but two men who were strangers to her, standing beside the path. Their forms were vague and shadowy, and she was afraid to approach them, but they called to her to come on; and since there was no other way for her to go, she went forward and tried to pass them; but when she reached them, they seized her, and she was caught up and hurried somewhere,—in what direction, or for how long a time, she could not tell, for she lost consciousness, and did not come to herself until she found that she was being set down in front of a house. The two men were still with her. She looked around, and noticed that there were no tracks about the house, except directly in front of the door. The men told her to go in, and take her place in the middle of the room. When she entered, she found that it was so dark that nothing could be seen except one little ray of light, that came from a long way through the darkness overhead. She stood for a long time watching this, with her face turned upward, when she heard the voice of an old woman saying, 'Why did they bring that woman here?' The girl did not know that there was any one in the room, and she tried to discover some one in the darkness, but could not see anything. Another voice said, 'Why don't you fix her?' and she heard the old woman coughing as she came toward her. It was a very old woman, with a wand in her hand. She led the girl over and stood her with her face toward the door, and made passes around her and over her clothing with the wand, when suddenly it became light, and she saw that the room was full of women, all looking at her. The place was so crowded, that there was no place vacant but one, which was reserved for the two men. She ran to that place and covered her face with her hands, for she was ashamed

to think that she had stood so long looking upward in the presence of so many people. She remained there until evening, when the two young men came in. They staid but a little while, and then went out again, saying that they were going to the kashime.

"Presently some one started a fire in the house, and the girl was hardly able to breathe on account of the stifling atmosphere. She pulled her parka up over her mouth, and found that in that way she could get a little breath. She looked down at the fire and saw the sticks moving about of themselves. She wondered at this, and jumped down and ran to the fire and poked the sticks together. The flame leaped up, when a voice at her feet said, 'What did you do that for? You are burning me.' Another voice said, 'These down-river women have no shame about anything. They do whatever comes into their heads.' When she heard that, she looked more closely, and saw the outlines of the figure of an old man sitting by the fire, with his parka pulled up, so as to warm his back. It was he who had complained of being burned. The reason that the sticks had moved was, that there were a great many women from the village outside, getting fire from that place, but she was unable to see them. She heard one of them asking her why she did not let them get fire, instead of poking the sticks down. After the fire had burned down and the curtain had been drawn over the smoke-hole, the women told her to go out of doors and look around. She did this, and found that the house stood in the midst of a village, larger than any that she had ever seen. The place was full of people walking back and forth; and the houses stretched away as far as she could see, and farther.

"She stood looking upon this scene for some time, and then turned and went into the house. The young men presently came in from the kashime, and their mother sent them a bowl of fish that she had prepared for them. They invited the girl to eat with them; but she was nauseated by the very sight of the food, as well as by its odor, and she could neither eat it, nor drink the water that they offered her. So they took their meal without her. Every day this was repeated. Food was always offered her, but she was never able to touch it; and her only entertainment was to walk outside.

"The other women also made fun of her, probably because they were jealous. Day by day she became weaker from the want of food, until her strength was almost gone. It became more difficult for her to breathe, too, and she sat with her face under her parka nearly all the time. One day, when she was at death's door, she sat as usual, with her face under her parka, and thought of the clear water that she used to drink at home, and it seemed to her as though there were nothing else in the world that would taste to her so good. She felt that she was about to die, and she lifted her face to look around, when she was delighted to see at her side a bowl of water, clear and good, and beside it another bowl filled with mashed blueberries mixed with seal-oil, and on this were laid the finest kind of dried white-fish. She caught up the bowl and drank eagerly, and afterward ate some of the food. When the young men came in, she asked them if they would not like some of her food; but they turned away from it, as she had done from theirs, and went to eating their own distasteful food. This kept up for half a year. She did not know where the food and water came from, which she found by her side from time to time. It was really her parents, who were making offerings for her, thinking that she was dead.

"As winter drew near, the people among whom she was staying began to talk of the winter hunt, and to make preparations for it. The women who lived in the house, and who were jealous of her, teased her by telling her that there was a hill on the way to the hunting-grounds, which she would be unable to climb, and that she would be left behind. The mother of the two young men assured her that this was so, but she told her that she would tell her what to do; and under her direction she made a great quantity of clothing,—mittens, boots, and ornamented moose-skin coats,—which she stowed away in bags, keeping the matter a secret from the young men. These things she was to take with her when they set out upon the hunt.

"At length the time came for them all to start. The people of the village streamed out in a great crowd, and the trail was crowded with figures as far as the eye could reach. The family to which the girl was attached were the last of all to start, and the girl and the old woman were in the rear. As they went on, the hill of which they had told her came in sight; and she saw that the trail led up a steep precipice, which it would be impossible for her to ascend. Those in front of her made nothing of it, going up as lightly as they walked upon level ground; but when she attempted to do the same thing, not only was she unable to imitate them, but her feet stuck fast, and she could not lift them. The young men had gone up, and were out of sight; but the old woman had remained behind with the girl, who finally found that when she attempted to turn around and retrace her steps, she could do so. Now the old woman showed her good-will; for she told the girl that the men would come back looking for her, and that they would search for her four days before giving her up, and that if they found her they would kill her. If she wished to go on, she would allow herself to be killed, and then she would have no difficulty in getting up the precipice; but if she wished to return to her own people, she must go back to the Yukon by the trail that they had come, and by following it she would come out at a fishing-camp, where there were great numbers of fish-nets, and racks upon which to dry the fish. She was to remain there until the spring; and when the water was open enough for her to fish, she was to catch as many fish as possible, and to hang them on the frames and dry them. When the ice had left the river, means would be provided for her to finish her journey.

"So the girl chose to go back to her own people; and the old woman dug out a great hole in the path by which they had come, and made the girl get into it, with her sled and the bags full of clothing, and then threw the snow back upon her, trampling it down with her snowshoes, so that it was impossible to tell where she was concealed. The men came back and looked for the girl, as the old woman had said they would do. Four days they searched for her; and when they finally gave it up and went away, she came out from under the snow, and went down to the fishing-camp, as she had been told to do. Spring came, and her catch of fish was excellent; but she could not use them, for they affected her in the same way that those in the house had done. Notwithstanding this, she kept on fishing, and hanging the fish up to dry, according to the directions that she had received.

"One night, after the ice had stopped running in the river, she went to bed as usual; but in the middle of the night she was awakened by a great noise, and, running out, she saw an enormous log, which had grounded in front of her camp. It was a green spruce, still covered with branches.

Among these she made a hiding-place for herself, weaving them in and out; and when this was done, she went to the house for the bags containing the clothing, and stowed them away in her retreat. Then she attempted to push the log out into the stream, but found that she could not do it. Stopping for a moment to think what she might have left behind, she thought of her work-bag, which she had left in the house on the bank. When she had run to get this, she found that the log would move, and so she set out upon her journey down the river. The log kept to the middle of the river, until she came in sight of a village, and heard the sound of singing and dancing. Some one said, 'Why do they not go out and see what is on the log?' and finally two men set out in canoes and came alongside. She kept herself concealed from the people in the village, but spoke to the men, and offered them gifts of clothing if they would go back and report that they had found nothing. They did this, and she kept on unmolested.

"All summer and fall she floated on; and her experience at the first village was so often repeated, that she found that her stock of clothing was at last exhausted. Then, just before the river began to freeze, the log grounded again, on the right bank, going down; and she went ashore, and kept on her way on foot. Village after village she passed, when one day she saw her father making his way upstream in an old broken canoe. She called to him, but he seemed not to hear her. Again and again she called, and ran frantically along the bank, waving and calling, until he had gone out of sight; and she turned back, and sorrowfully resumed her journey down the river.

"The cold increased, and winter came on. Then she turned into a little bird, and kept on her way. As she came to a village, she would light upon the edge of the open smoke-hole of a house, and sing; and the people, looking up, would say, 'How is it that that bird sings the name of the girl who died?' for she sang her own name. At length she arrived at her parents' village at the time when the parka feasts are now held. All the people were either in their own houses or in the kashime. She resumed her own shape, and went into her mother's house, and saw her mother sitting by the fire, weeping. She paid no attention to her daughter, even though she went to her and put her arms around her, and kissed her on the cheek; but she stopped crying, to say, 'What is it that makes my waist and my cheek feel so strangely?' The girl called to her again and again; but she did not seem to hear, even though she sat down upon her lap and put her face against her mother's. At length she began to look around, and, seeing some fish-eggs lying in a corner, she took them and rubbed them over her clothing. Then her mother saw her and screamed, not knowing what to make of her appearance. 'It is my own daughter!' said she. They sat down; and the girl told her mother all that had happened to her, and how she had seen her father going up the river in a broken canoe. 'He died,' said her mother, 'in the fall, just before the river froze, and we broke his canoe and put it on the grave.' Then she asked for her brothers, and learned that they were in the kashime, preparing to celebrate a parka feast for the sister whom they supposed to be dead.

"Now the mother and her daughter prepared to go into the kashime, and they took with them a large blanket of beaver-skin, with which the older woman screened the other when they entered. In this way she reached a corner of the room unperceived by those who were there. She remained

quiet until they were about to begin the feast, and then danced out into the middle of the room before them all. They were astonished to see her, and no one knew what to do or say. But she went to her place; and then her brothers brought her the parkas that they had intended to give away, and asked her to tell them all that had befallen her; and from that time to this, the parka feasts have been celebrated, and offerings of food and drink have been made for the dead, in order that they may not suffer for the want of anything that we can do for them. Four times the feast must be given before the spirit is satisfied.

"Now as to the log upon which that girl came down the Yukon, it came from the place where the dead are, to this world where we live; and as to the white men who are coming into this country in such numbers, they can do with impunity things that would kill an Indian, because they are the spirits of dead Indians who have come back to live among us."<sup>1</sup>

**ANVIK, ALASKA**

<sup>1</sup> Compare E. W. Nelson, "The Eskimo about Bering Strait," *18th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, 1896-97, p. 488.